

BUYING HELP

What do I need to edit my photos?

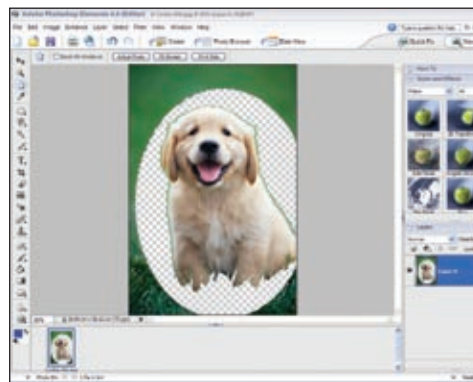
Q I have a Compaq Presario 1519 PC and an Epson R300 inkjet printer, and I want to use my computer to edit photographs. I've heard that Epson used to manufacture a preview monitor for the R300 printer, but I can't find it for sale anywhere. Would it be useful and, if so, where could I buy one? Would you also recommend that I buy a recent version of Adobe Photoshop?

John Skelton

A Epson did indeed make an LCD monitor for the R300 printer, and you can still buy the two together as the R300 Monitor Edition. This kind of monitor is useful if you want to connect your digital camera directly to the printer. But as you want to edit photographs on your PC before printing them, it's unnecessary.

If you want to edit digital photographs, Adobe's Photoshop software is one of the best programs available. However, it costs well over £400 including VAT. If you want to build up your editing skills without spending a fortune, we suggest you buy Adobe

Photoshop Elements 4.0 instead. This is a special version of Photoshop that's designed to be easy to use, and it costs less than £70 including VAT. It includes all the tools you'll need for retouching photos and can also help you keep your collection in order. **TR**



▲ Photoshop Elements 4.0 includes all the tools you'll need to edit photographs and it's great value

Which portable do I pick?

Q Can you advise me on portable media players? I am considering the Dell Axim X51v PDA, the iRiver U10, Sony's PSP and the Microsoft Origami Project. Which one would you recommend? I'm inclined to go for the Axim because it's so versatile and I could use it for homework, but what about the Origami Project? I have £350 to spend.

Alex Curran

A The answer to this depends on what you want your new device to do. Microsoft's Origami project isn't available to buy yet, and it's expected to cost £700, so we can cross that

off the shortlist. If you want to play games on the move, Sony's PlayStation Portable (PSP) is great, and it can also be used to play music and video files stored on a Memory Stick Duo card. It is more likely to distract you from your homework than help you with it, though.

The iRiver U10 is similar, but it costs less and it can't play proper video games. The Dell Axim X51v can also play music and video clips. It's more expensive but it's a fully functional Pocket PC, so you can use it for serious work. We would recommend that you go for the PSP for fun, and the Dell X51v for homework purposes. **TR**

Do I need an expensive bag?

Q I have to buy a bag for my notebook and I want one that looks like a normal bag. Is there any reason why I should go for a specially designed one? They seem very expensive.

Craig Barrett

A Notebook bags might seem very expensive, but there's a good reason why you should buy one: they offer protection. A notebook is an expensive purchase and it won't take too kindly to being dropped. Even if the case survives the fall, you could break the hard disk or optical drive.

The screen is even more critical. Not all notebooks have tough chassis, and carrying around a notebook can lead to the screen getting bashed and damaged. If you don't want an expensive repair bill, you need to buy a dedicated bag.

These will have padding on the sides to prevent damage. Most notebook bags, such as those made by Port Designs, have air-filled cushions at the bottom.

These protect your PC from a fall and should save you money. We reviewed Port Designs' Seattle bag in *What's New, Shopper* May 2006 and gave it four stars. This bag is ideal for occasional travelling, and costs just £29 including VAT from www.amazon.co.uk. **DL**



▲ The Seattle from Port Designs is light for a notebook bag, but it is terrific value and certainly looks the part

YOUR EXPERTS

For advice on PC purchases, contact Buying Help

Tom Royal

Labs Editor Tom Royal can recommend the best product for your specific requirements.



David Ludlow

If the product you need exists, Reviews Editor David Ludlow knows where you can buy it.



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PC display or HD TV?

Q I want to buy an Xbox 360 games console. I don't have a lot of space so I need to find one display that can be connected to both the Xbox and my existing PC.

I don't know whether to look for a 19" LCD with VGA and DVI inputs or a 17" widescreen HD-ready TV. I know that the 19" display would look better when playing PC games such as Half-Life 2, but I don't know if it's possible to connect the Xbox to my PC's Audigy 2 ZS sound card. Can you help?

Thomas Jenkins

A Both the methods you suggest can work well, but you'll need to choose your display carefully. Microsoft sells a special cable that allows you to connect an Xbox 360 games console to any PC display with a D-sub VGA input. If you buy a PC display with

both VGA and DVI inputs, you could connect the Xbox to one and your PC to the other. This works well, but we'd recommend looking for a widescreen PC display. If you use a standard PC display with a 4:3 aspect ratio, you'll be limited to a resolution of 640x480 pixels, as all the higher Xbox display modes use widescreen.

Alternatively, you could buy an HD TV, but you'll want to make sure that it has enough inputs for your PC and Xbox 360 to be connected at the same time. Most 17" HD TVs have a resolution of 1,280x768 pixels, which is acceptable for PC use.

Whichever route you choose, don't worry about your PC's sound card. Although it is possible to connect the Xbox 360 through your PC, it's far easier to connect it directly to your speaker set. You might need a splitter cable or phono-to-jack plug adaptor, but these cost only a few pounds. **TR**



▲ The Xbox is designed to be connected by TV or PC screen but the latter requires a special cable

Widescreen woes

Q I bought a new Acer AL1916W widescreen monitor. Unfortunately, my graphics card does not support its native resolution of 1,440x900 pixels so everything looks blurry and indistinct. Can you recommend a graphics card that will produce this resolution?

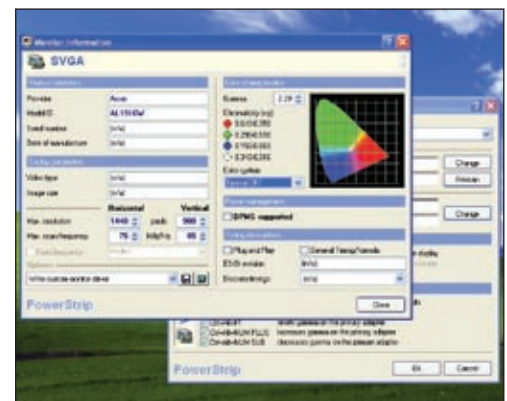
Mark Vanstone

A Many graphics cards produced over the past few years are capable of supporting a resolution of 1,440x900 pixels. You didn't mention which card you're currently using, but we would recommend that you update your video card driver before you buy anything new. Installing the latest driver for your card can sometimes enable new resolutions, particularly if your existing driver is very old. It's also important to install the correct drivers for your monitor, as Windows will only allow you to select resolutions that it thinks are supported by the display.

If new drivers don't do the trick then you could try to set your computer to a custom display resolution. One easy way to do this is using a well-known utility called PowerStrip. This software, which is shareware, can be downloaded from www.entechtaiwan.com/util/ps.shtm. It will cost you \$30 (around £17) to continue using the program, but this is certainly a lot cheaper than buying a new graphics card.

If PowerStrip can't help then you may have to buy a new graphics card. ATI specifies that its current budget graphics processor, the Radeon X1300, supports a resolution of 1,440x900 pixels. A graphics card based on this chipset can cost less than £65 including VAT. If you are interested in playing the latest games, though, you will need something a bit faster.

If your PC uses an older AGP graphics card slot, choosing a card is a little trickier. We



▲ PowerStrip can be used to force your graphics card to display additional resolutions

couldn't find any older AGP cards that are explicitly certified to run at 1,440x900, but online reports indicate that Nvidia's excellent-value GeForce 6600GT cards will do so. **TR**

Will two GeForce 6600 cards play the game?

Q I'm thinking about buying a PC with two Nvidia GeForce 6600 GT graphics cards. The price seems fine, but will I be able to play all the new games at high resolutions and detail settings? If not, which card should I go for?

Steven Williams

A While SLI is undoubtedly a brilliant technology, it's not a guarantee of high performance. The GeForce 6600 GT is quite an old card now. Putting two of them together in SLI mode certainly helps and increases performance to around the level of a

single 6800 GT. In other words, it's good enough for playing games such as Doom 3 and Half Life 2 at a resolution of 1,024x768. You should be able to play newer games at this resolution too, but as more demanding games come out you'll have to turn down resolution and detail settings.

When you're buying your new PC, it might be better to see if you can find one with a single 7800 GT graphics card. These currently retail for around £230 including VAT, which is actually around the same price as two 6600 GT cards. The 7800 GT is very fast and will run all current games at a resolution of 1,280x1,024. If you buy



▲ A 7800 GT graphics card will play all the current games, and you can upgrade to SLI at a later date

an SLI motherboard, you'll be able to upgrade with a second 7800 GT card later on.

The combination of these two cards should mean that you'll be able to play games released next year and probably even the year after, and at high resolutions. **DL CS**